

Lent 6: PALM SUNDAY

Luke 19:28-40 [MW19-14]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 14 April 2019

It was a long journey to cover a relatively short distance

- three years it took, beginning with a time of testing, then calling companions gathering followers, wandering in Galilee
- in a popular ministry which was primarily personal and marked by personal encounters, occasional times of withdrawal in solitude, away from the crowds sharing intimacy, trying to teach a bunch of quarrelsome misfits who never really got it, what he was about
- and finally the road to Jerusalem into the glare of national, political, public debate and conflict

Jesus came at last to the city

- after three years wandering the countryside ministering to the people who flocked to hear him and to seek healing and hope
- he set his face towards Jerusalem, knowing that it held great danger for him for Jerusalem was not a peaceful, prosperous city
- it was a city with a history of repeated invasion and attack in a country occupied by a mighty imperial power
- it was a city full of rumours, threat, discontent where the poorest suffered most, and cried out for change
- it was a city where the pieties of the religious often seemed far removed from the suffering of the people

Like the people of so many cities throughout history

- the people of Jerusalem expected deliverance to come through military force their own prophets had told the story of conquest often enough
- these prophets had a word of promise to keep hope alive in testing times the promise of a Messiah, a deliverer
- many of them looked for a great leader, a warrior hero, to save them some of them, as the rumours spread like wildfire through Jerusalem, thought that Jesus might be that leader

Clearly Jesus was aware of that

- this was no attempt to slip quietly into the city without anyone noticing the way he came, the time and manner of his coming all referred back to the scriptural prophecies, notably that of Zechariah
- Jesus came to Jerusalem, and entered it humbly, and riding on a donkey there is little doubt that the crowds would see Jesus's entry in the light of this prophecy
- a donkey was not the customary mount of a warrior or a king it was the mount of a non-combatant, a civilian, a merchant, perhaps, or even a priest

Zechariah saw the Messiah as the prince of peace

- and this was the way Jesus chose to announce himself to Jerusalem.

I will remove the war chariots from Israel and take the war horses from Jerusalem; the bows used in battle will be destroyed. Your king will make peace among the nations. (Zechariah 9:10)

The prince of peace ... perhaps

- but it was actually an 'in your face' confrontational way to arrive
a mighty challenge: to appear making the most audacious and blasphemous claim
trailing a vagabond army of followers from the north
into a holy city, in an occupied territory, of the greatest power on earth

It was a challenge to the Pharisees

- who did not want anything to upset the Romans
and threaten the freedom to practise their religion
- it was a challenge to Herod
who was already very confused about what was going on
- it was a challenge to the military
who didn't want their job of controlling a city, and a country
made any more difficult by yet another popular insurrection
- and it was a challenge, or at least a question, to the ordinary people of Jerusalem

This is who I say I am - who do you say I am?

- this entry to Jerusalem was the most political act of Jesus' life

And yet, all of them in their different ways missed the point of this public challenge

- the Pharisees, scholars and theorists as they were
did not know how to respond to this man who refused to debate or argue with them
hardly spoke to them in fact, but countered their intellectualising by doing things
which, infuriatingly, were hard to argue with
but which left them feeling foolish and exposed

The military authorities knew how to put down armed uprisings, no one knew better

- but they had no strategy to deal with someone who offered no violence to anyone
and in fact discouraged his followers from violence
while still posing a threat to public order

And the people?

- they had crowded the streets of the city to welcome him,
and for sure many of them - particularly the poor ones who made up the majority
wanted peace
- they wanted an end to occupation, bread in their stomachs, a better life
what people always want
so of course they welcomed him
- oh, but crowds are fickle ... their mood swings, and people follow the crowd
a crowd's a funny thing; it loves a spectacle, it comes out for celebrations
and carnivals and joins in with enthusiasm, is good-natured
- it comes out equally for death, for funerals
stands silently or weeps or prays

Sometimes a crowd comes out in solidarity, to make a point, to demonstrate a feeling

- but a crowd can also turn angry, become threatening, get nasty, do terrible things
what makes the mood swing in a crowd, turns it into a baying mob?
what tips the balance between a homecoming and a hanging?
- what is the energy that races, like lightening, through a crowd?

When did it all change???

Was it when the crowd realised that peace was not going to come

- after a great, bloody, all-conquering battle that there was going to be no “Desert Storm” kind of military action
- that, for Jesus, peace was not an outcome but a way, and a hard way?

When did it all change???

Was it when he refused to defend himself with violence?

- was it when they realised that if they decided to stand beside Jesus that they would also stand out, become visible that they would be going against the majority?

When did it all change???

Was it when Jesus challenged them to make choices

- that went against all conventional wisdom that might lead them into danger?
- was it when he confronted them with what they knew about themselves but preferred to attribute to others?
- was it when they guessed that fullness of life had to go through loss and emptiness first?

That crowd's suspicions were actually reasonable and well-founded

- Jesus' friends did find themselves on the losing side they had to give up their quiet lives they had to give up what security and status they had
- Jesus' friends in fact had to give up their previous identity to let go of their pasts, their family attachments all of the things that had made them who they were
- they had to give up their prejudices and preferences and some of them had to give up their lives

Here is what writer and preacher Kathy Galloway says about Jesus and crowds:

Jesus was a lightning conductor for the crowd in Jerusalem. During this last year or so, I have been very aware of many crowds in many cities: in Baghdad and London, in Madrid and Gaza City, in Port-au-Prince and Monrovia, and others you can doubtless name. The moods that rippled through the crowd in Jerusalem have all been visible in these cities, and the challenges. Palm Sunday is always happening, and we are always being confronted by the challenge of that different way of being; the way of peace that does not shrink from conflict but refuses violence, the way that does not theorise but engages with the real needs of suffering people, the way that sees the people who are overlooked and not counted, the way of self-offering.

As we walk with Jesus through this Holy Week

- let us be determined to stand apart from that fickle crowd let us pray for the courage to face the challenges
- let us bear not weapons of any kind but rather let us bear hope and light and the courage to follow wherever Jesus leads us

[A moment for silent reflection]

then ...

*Loving God, at this time,
we remember that going up to Jerusalem
cost Jesus his very life.*

*Forgive us for the shallowness
of our faith,
and the timidity of our following:
forgive us for the ready excuses
we make for going our own way
and claiming it as yours.*

*Turn us around again, we pray,
by your Holy Spirit,
active within us and among us.
Show us how to be open again
to your faithfulness
and to your freedom,
that we may live
new lives
and be again bearers
of the seeds of the Kingdom
of Jesus*

(John Harvey)